

As brothers and sisters of Christ Jesus, who together share in a heavenly calling, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1) – those people of faith who have gone before us, and have lived with trust in Christ Jesus through times of great upheaval and uncertainty. In Christ we are not alone, no matter what circumstances we face in life, no matter how socially isolated we may become in worldly terms.

We are now facing a situation where, perhaps for some time, we will not be able to enjoy the blessings of Christian community as we normally do. This does not mean, however, that we cannot together grow in faith in God, and in love for one another and for our neighbour. We are people who have been baptised into Christ, who together call out on God as our Father, and who, by the Holy Spirit, are free to meditate on God's word and to do acts of kindness wherever we are – even if we are confined to our homes.

As a congregation we will continue to receive God's word in worship – in a perhaps far more limited way at the Bethlehem church building, and yet continually in our homes as we set aside time for listening to the Holy Scriptures and for simple and faithful prayer to God. We will work together as a congregation to encourage each other and to show love, even though our contact will in many cases be limited to the internet and to telephone conversations. We will continue to publicly confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. And we will entrust ourselves and our world to the care and protection of God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We can entrust ourselves and our world into God's protection because, on the basis of God's word, we know that God does his work in response to human suffering; that our Lord Jesus brings his light into human darkness and need.

Let's listen to the reading:

As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

First of all: notice who's asking the questions—the disciples. They are not asking to test or trap Jesus; they are students who want to learn. They call Jesus 'Rabbi', which means 'Teacher'. Note: pay attention to how the titles for Jesus change as the narrative unfolds. Jesus' disciples' question has as its basic premise that if there is suffering, then it must be the consequence of sin. But the problem with the man born blind is: whose sin? If it's the parents, then why is the son suffering? But if it's the man himself, how could he be to blame? He suffered before he had opportunity to sin.

In all of it the hidden question seems to me to be: Is God unjust?

Listen to how Jesus responds to the question: **Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'**

The disciples see suffering, and want to know where the blame lies. Jesus sees the man born blind, and sees an opportunity for God's works to be revealed.

The narrative goes on: **We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.'** When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, **'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam'** (which means Sent).

Let's pause here. Did the blind man call out to Jesus? Did he ask Jesus for anything? No. Did others ask on his behalf, speaking up for him? No.

What happens is that Jesus sees the man and hears the disciples' question. It is as if the accusation at the heart of their question moves Jesus to show his disciples who God is and his love and compassion; especially for those in need. Jesus took the initiative, as he will throughout the narrative.

Also: Perhaps it's because the man does not ask for anything that Jesus takes the unusual step of making the mud and giving the man a command. He involves this man, who has been passive, to enter into his healing.

The man born blind does as Jesus says: **Then he went and washed and came back able to see.**

Now we won't go into the detail of the narrative: it's lengthy, and very suitable for in-depth Bible study. Today I want to draw your attention to the way the man describes Jesus as the narrative develops.

First of all the neighbours and people who had seen him beg ask:

'[Ho]w were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, **'Where is he?'** He said, **'I do not know.'**

Jesus is described simply as a 'man' – a human being. The man born blind (who is never named, which should give us pause to consider whether he is an everyman, a person who stands for all of us for we are all born spiritually blind) ... the man born blind does not even yet know what Jesus looks like.

The next step takes place in relation to the Pharisees' questioning. The Pharisees are divided: they cannot tell whether Jesus comes from God.

They ask the man: **'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.'** He said, **'He is a prophet.'** The man born blind, in the face of questioning and division becomes clearer in his confession: Jesus is a prophet; one who is authorised by God to speak and act with God's power.

The man born blind is then questioned by the Jewish authorities. It is their opposition to Jesus that provokes the man into a clearer and clearer confession of who Jesus is not, and who he is: **So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.'** He answered, **'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.'**

First, he rejects the authorities' confident assertion that Jesus is a sinner. Then he goes on to make a further affirmation of who Jesus is.

Listen to what he says: **We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.'**

Even in the face of strong opposition, the man born blind affirms that Jesus is from God and this earns him not thanks, but exclusion from his community:

They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

Now notice how Jesus again takes the initiative. The man born blind still does not know what Jesus looks like. It is Jesus who finds him: **Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.'** Jesus said to him, **'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.'**

First the man, in seeing Jesus, addresses him respectfully. He calls him 'sir', and then, in being told that Jesus is the Son of Man, God in the flesh, he says **'Lord, I believe.'** **And he worshipped him.**

He calls him 'Lord'. This is in fact the same word as 'sir' in the Greek, but the different translation hits the mark and the man born blind's body language makes it clear. He kneels before Jesus; he prostrates himself. He acknowledges who Jesus is: Lord.

In response to this act of worship, Jesus says: **'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.'**

On the face of it, this statement seems to contradict what we heard two weeks ago from John's Gospel: **Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.**

What is going on?

Think about it this way:

Imagine a doctor comes to a town with the skill and medicine to heal. The doctor comes not to harm but to heal. But then imagine that many in the town claim they are healthy, when

they are in fact dying. The doctor's presence will be a kind of judgement on the town. It will reveal a great division between those who acknowledge their sickness and those who refuse to be helped.

This picture can help us make sense of the conclusion of the narrative:

Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin.

But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.

As long as we refuse to acknowledge our natural spiritual blindness our opportunity for healing passes us by.

Christ Jesus is the one who sees us in our need. He takes the initiative to heal us, to bring his light into our lives so that we can see with the eyes that he gives us, especially as we see others in their need.

We are people who have been washed clean in holy baptism and who confess that Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We worship him, and acknowledge him as the giver of blessing and healing. We do not need to be trapped into assigning blame but can see in human suffering an opportunity for God's works to be made manifest, even in our world now.

We know that God's works shine forth as we love one another. So let's show love for one another by keeping in contact at this time. Let's use the opportunities we have to call each other, write to each other, pray for each other, and for our neighbours and our world.

From a human point of view there is much reason to be fearful, but our confidence is in the Lord Jesus, who sees in suffering an opportunity for God's works to be made manifest.